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Central Intelligence Agency



Washington, D. C. 20505

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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China's Malipo Campaign

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Summary

Despite the lack of intense border fighting since January, China is maintaining its commitment to the Malipo Campaign. Chinese troops continue to hold strategic high points just inside Vietnam first seized in 1984, and shell Vietnam's Ha Tuyen Province daily. More than 85,000 Chinese troops remain on the battlefield. The fighting provides valuable combat experience for Chinese forces and serves as a proving ground for new combat equipment. Beijing is likely to continue the campaign for the foreseeable future, demonstrating its opposition to the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia and attempting to dissuade Hanoi from expanding operations against the Cambodian resistance.

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This memorandum was prepared by [] Office of East Asian Analysis. Information available as of 23 September 1986 was used in its preparation. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, International Security Branch, China Division, OEA, [].

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In the two years since China began its "strategy of a thousand thorns" against Vietnam, limited but persistent fighting has continued on a remote and mountainous battlefield south of Malipo in Vietnam's Ha Tuyen Province.

- Almost 85,000 Chinese troops--five combat divisions--are now at Malipo, [redacted]
[redacted]
- The last major infantry attacks on Vietnamese positions territory were in January, but the Chinese continue daily harassment shelling [redacted]
[redacted]
- Any new assaults probably will be confined to the narrow Malipo salient, where Beijing continues to improve military installations and roads, [redacted]
[redacted]

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Throughout the two-year Malipo campaign, Beijing's strategy has been marked by carefully measured responses linked to military and political developments in Cambodia, and Hanoi's reaction to Chinese pressure. [redacted]

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The Chinese are improving their capacity to launch attacks, underscoring Beijing's commitment to maintain this direct military pressure on Vietnam.

[redacted]

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- [redacted] hundreds of new troop shelters have been built at border staging areas. These more permanent facilities ease rotations of troops to the battlefield.

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[redacted] air power has yet to be a factor in the fighting, [redacted]
[redacted]

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These activities illustrate continuing efforts by the Chinese to take advantage of unique training opportunities offered by border skirmishes, and to commit advanced forces and equipment to the border campaign in the future. [redacted]

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Beijing is ready for the next Cambodian dry season (November-May) and is prepared to increase military pressure--within carefully defined bounds--if Vietnamese forces launch heavy attacks on the resistance or penetrate into Thailand.

- Given the large numbers of Chinese troops currently at Malipo, it is likely that Beijing will step up the level of fighting at the beginning of the dry season, to impress upon Hanoi Beijing's commitment to use force in response to Vietnamese attacks on the Cambodian resistance.

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Short of a major Vietnamese incursion into Thailand, however, China is unlikely to expand the scope of battle beyond Malipo.

- Beijing cannot afford to side-track its economic modernization program with a major "second lesson" against Vietnam.
- Moreover, with the dramatic increase in Vietnamese troop strength since 1979 along the Sino-Vietnamese border--and the marked improvement in equipment supplied by the Soviet Union--Beijing would probably have to mass a force of over two million men to inflict the same level of damage to Vietnam that it did in 1979.

Hanoi, for its part, shows no inclination to widen the fight beyond Malipo, which has relatively little strategic significance, or to move additional divisions to the border as long as the Chinese stay clear of the traditional invasion routes. Moreover, Beijing probably realizes that the price it exacts today through limited military activity is not sufficient to force Vietnam to withdraw from Cambodia. Short of a massive, and we believe unlikely, Chinese assault to take Hanoi, there is probably no military action Beijing can take that will break Vietnam's resolve.

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